

Edmund White  
The Flâneur: A Stroll through the Paradoxes of Paris  
211 pages  
Bloomsbury Publishing, 2001

Most of us remember the way we felt when we first realized that we were smarter than our parents. After a childhood spent looking up to them as all-knowing, with an answer for every question, you bring them a calculus problem and they say, “Oh, I don’t know, I never took calculus.” And then, just like that, the illusion falls away. They are just ordinary people, like everyone else.

Growing up, Americans looked up to Paris in much the same way. Paris was the center of the world, of all sophistication, culture, fashion, politics, art, and philosophy. Hundreds of books were written about Paris by American tourists and ex-patriots, each inevitably praising the French for their attitudes about art, life, and sex. Then as if overnight, America grew up, Paris grew old, and suddenly there just wasn’t as much to look up to. A new generation of books began to crop up with an adolescent’s mix of nostalgia and superiority, full of questions like, “Is French culture dead?” “Is French cuisine passé?” and even “Is there anything left to say about Paris at all?”

It is in the middle of this mood of disenchantment that Bloomsbury Books decided to kick off its new series “in which some of the finest writers of our time reveal the secrets of the city they know best” by assigning American writer Edmund White the city everyone knows best—Paris. In *The Flâneur*, White navigates a Paris that is increasingly stranded by history.

A flâneur is someone who wanders a city, strolling, taking things in, with no preconceptions and no agenda. Edmund White is the perfect flâneur, intelligent, perceptive, interested in everything, open to everything. His idiosyncratic observations are the perfect antidote to the typically weary American tourist, guidebook in hand, on a forced march through culture. (For Americans, Paris is still a duty, but an increasingly tedious one, like the sixth-grade field trips we all made to state capitols or old forts.)

White is intimately acquainted with Paris, having wandered its streets lovingly for nearly twenty years. He is well versed with all the many things people love about Paris: the odd little stores, the eccentric museums, the many tucked-away places. But even he admits “the city’s glory days are long in the past” and piquantly comments that “Paris is the one city left where the tyranny of Paris fashions still holds women in its thrall.”

White goes on to launch some more serious assaults, though he is not the first writer to note that “Paris . . . has become a cultural backwater. There aren’t more than two or three internationally known French painters living anywhere in France . . . the galleries look like amateur art fairs . . . few French novels are translated into other languages; since Foucault’s death no philosopher has had a universal stature; the center of the city is too expensive to welcome young bohemians or wannabe novelists.”

In many ways, *The Flâneur* is a book that has come out at the wrong time. Thirty years ago, anyone would envy White his insider’s access to Paris. But now White can say with certainty that “French culture has become a museum” and add that “even the Paris club scene is so dismal that every weekend the ‘E-crowd’ is tunnelling its way over to London.”

If French culture is now mainly an archive of things past, it is not surprising that White himself wanders back in time at least as often as he investigates Parisian life today. Whether discussing the life of the novelist Colette, the prominence of African-American entertainers in the

20s and 30s, or the persecution of homosexuals in the nineteenth-century, White also wanders the side streets of history—appropriate since Paris is as much a construct of history and literature as bricks and cement. White succeeds admirably in tying these “historical” concerns to modern-day situations (French racism against Arabs, AIDS scandals and cover-ups) but in so doing, he only accentuates the point that for Paris, the future is only a rehashing of the same old things.

White’s observations, though, are not merely the same old things, the same tired truisms about France or the Parisians. That is because White chooses to focus much of his attention on people and places that escape the public notice, including Paris’ racial minorities, its Jewish quarter, and its attitude towards AIDS and homosexuals. These observations are often loosely connected, weaving between personal observations, interviews, anecdotes, and history. What ties these vignettes together is largely the concept of the flâneur, and this conceit, of the wandering observer, gives White some license to meander in his storytelling.

Perhaps the most memorable chapter in *The Flâneur* is on Parisian royalists, a small but dedicated group that are working to re-institute the French monarchy and crown one of two warring aristocrats. Not only is the story original—and funny—but it does much to contrast the Paris that is progressive, modern, a shrine to fashion and ever-changing trends, with the Paris that is old-fashioned, traditional, and even backward-looking.

The chapter on the royalists nearly closes *The Flâneur*, but for White’s closing rhapsody. Half defense, half elegy, White looks at modern Paris: “the blue windows set in the doors of the boxes at the Opéra Comique . . . the drama with which waiters cluster around a table in a first-class restaurant . . . the pleasant shock of the klieg lights that suddenly turn night into day when a *bâteau mouche* glides by . . .” So much is passé, so much is a cliché, but there is still something to Paris. It doesn’t reside in the tourist spots, in the museums, on the runway, but in the details of a daily life that is beautiful, orderly, and timeless.

Mark Twain once made a well-known quip about how much your parents seem to learn between the time you are age fourteen and age twenty-one. Like these aging parents, Paris may still have a few pearls of wisdom left to offer the world.